

Letters to the Editor

Incorporating Music Therapy Into Primary Care

To the Editor: Music therapy is a treatment modality that harnesses music as a medical intervention to reach a therapeutic goal. In group or individual sessions, credentialed music therapists work with patients using techniques such as improvisation, lyric analysis, and composition. Music therapy is generally provided in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and private music therapy practices.

Studies conducted primarily in inpatient settings show that music therapists improve the symptoms of children with asthma and reduce hospitalizations¹; address children's mental health needs²; improve perinatal outcomes in pregnant women with depression, anxiety, and gestational hypertension or preeclampsia³; and improve pain and quality of life for individuals with chronic pain.⁴ For individuals with dementia, music therapy can decrease stress markers and agitation, reduce depression, and improve behavioral problems and short-term recall.⁵ Researchers have also observed a significant, long-term decrease in blood pressure after repeated music therapy interventions.⁶

Despite evidence supporting music therapy for many common conditions, it is rarely available in outpatient primary care settings. To increase access to this treatment, we need more data on the feasibility and effectiveness of music therapy in outpatient settings. These data may help address barriers to reimbursement. Medicare

pays for music therapy services in rehabilitation centers or hospital-based outpatient programs; six states have Medicaid coverage for limited populations. Private insurance plans may cover music therapy on a case-by-case basis, but no plans explicitly include music therapy services. Outpatient billing may be managed by modeling group music therapy on group mental health programs when treating psychiatric disorders or by following the example of acupuncture, which may be reimbursed if prescribed by a clinician for nonpsychiatric diagnoses.

Music therapy is a low-risk intervention that may improve the health of our patients with few to no adverse effects and at a lower cost than many commonly prescribed medications. More research should be done to support the inclusion of music therapy in primary care.

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